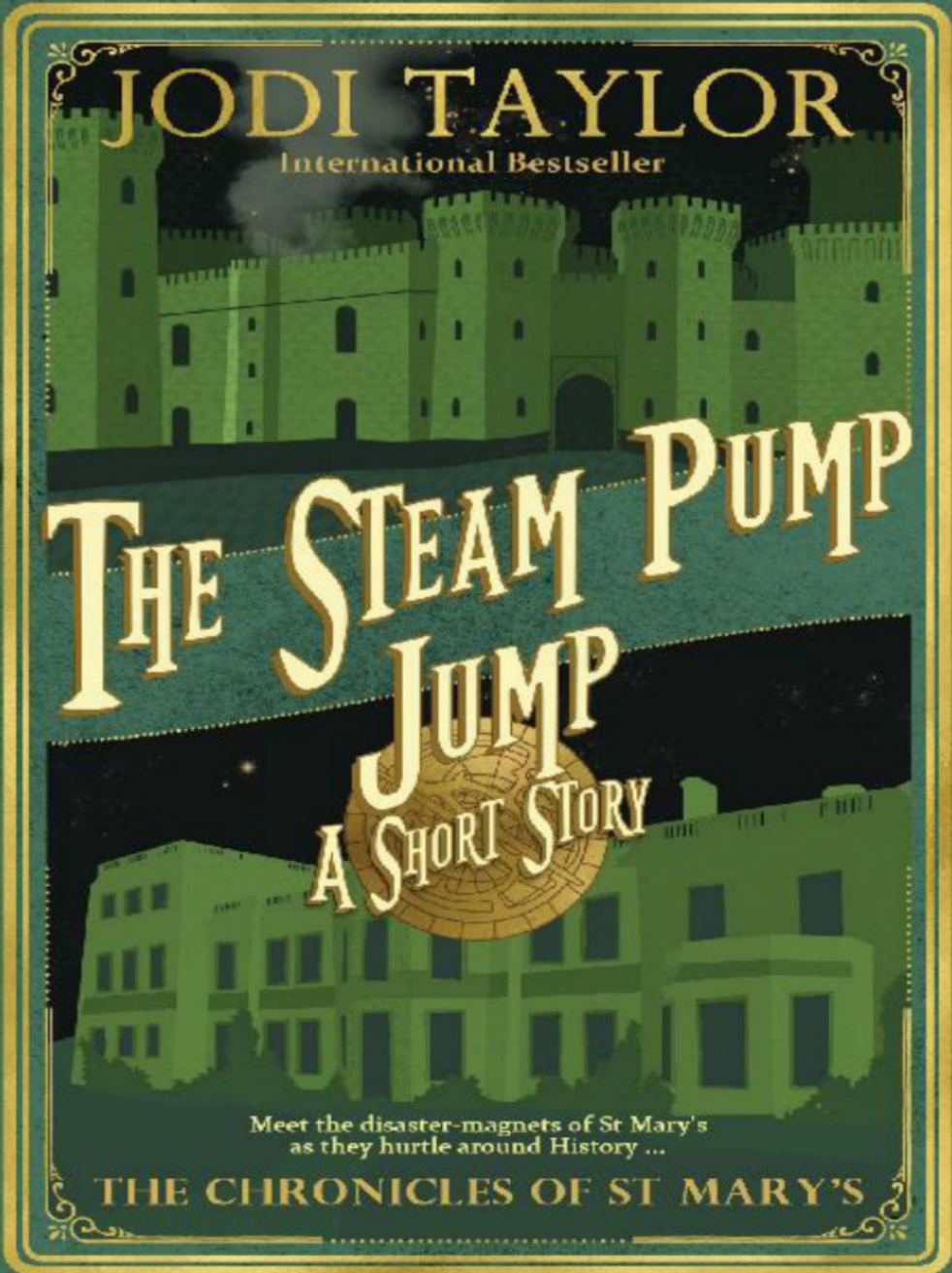




JODI TAYLOR

International Bestseller

THE STEAM PUMP JUMP

A SHORT STORY

Meet the disaster-magnets of St Mary's
as they hurtle around History ...

THE CHRONICLES OF ST MARY'S

The Steam-Pump Jump

A short story from
The Chronicles of St Mary's

Jodi Taylor

Author's Note

Unlike *The Battersea Barricades*, which takes place before St Mary's came into being, and can be read at any time, this story fits very definitely between *An Argumentation of Historians* and the next book – the title of which is still a matter of some dispute between me and Accent Press. All Hail, Accent Press etc. etc. If anyone has any title ideas, now is the time to step forward and cover yourself in glory. Or, given that this is St Mary's, cover yourself in something else altogether. I really must stop rambling and do some work.

Anyway, here's a summer short story I had to come up with because I talked Accent Press into publishing *The Battersea Barricades* on St George's Day, because that's when most of the action takes place. And they did. I was gobsmacked but never underestimate the power of good wine to influence a publisher. Flushed with triumph, I retired to my desk – or a damp corner of the Accent Press cellar – only to be met with the instruction that since now there would be no summer story because they were publishing early – which was my fault – I owed them one, and to be quick about it because I hadn't left myself much time, had I?

'I'm trying to finish the sequel to *White Silence*,' I snivelled. 'And start the next full-length St Mary's, which you've brought forward in the schedule. You know, just mentioning. Plus trying to get my head round the Christmas story which, knowing you, you'll want by the end of the month.'

'Yes?' they said. 'And your point?'

So, here we are. The summer story. Quite a simple intro – Max is injured and tied to Sick Bay but obviously a good historian would never let that get in her way. Step forward Mr Markham ...

Dramatis Thingummy

~~Mr. Moff~~ ~~Security~~. Matchmaker and lifeguard. Pretty in pink.

~~Security~~ ~~guard~~. Got the best of the sartorial deal.

~~Mrs. Enfield~~ ~~Wardrobe~~. A big advocate of pink. Sorry – rose.

~~Max~~ ~~Head~~ of the History Department. Non-ambulatory, but still managing to leave her mark on events.

~~Deputy~~ ~~Director~~ of St Mary's. Temporary Head of the History Department. Struggling, but his friends are behind him. How reassuring is that?

~~Miss Ling~~ ~~R&D~~. About to discover there are more interesting things in the world than steam-engines.

~~Miss Sides~~ ~~Side~~. About to fall down on the job.

~~Miss North~~ ~~North~~. The two of them are in trouble.

~~Chief Technical~~ ~~Technical~~ Officer. Recovering from his injuries. At long last.

Sometimes, when I don't have very much to do – and that doesn't happen very often, let me tell you – I sit back and trace the path of my life. The moments that led me to this here, and this now.

Not a lot of it is very edifying – there are things I would prefer to forget – but, up until as recently as a few years ago, I was a loveable little scamp with no problems and no responsibilities. Yes, all right, I was riddled with ringworm a lot of the time and I'll swear I've had more than my fair share of rectal parasites – although anyone who's had even one rectal parasite tends to think they've had more than their fair share – but who would have thought I'd be here, head of my own section, respectable (ish) and with looming responsibilities.

And yes, I know I promised to keep my head down – in fact I think I signed something to that effect – and to stay out of trouble and keep a low profile – especially the latter – but then they go and dump me in St Mary's. Well, if they're not going to keep up their end of the deal... then why should I?

‘Trust me,’ said Maxwell, weakly. ‘Get this wrong and you won’t live long enough to regret it.’

I was indignant. ‘Well, *there’s* a nice thing to say. Out of the goodness of my heart I’m visiting you on your Bed of Pain and barely have I started on your grapes than you’re hurling threats at my head. I liked you a lot better when you were unconscious.’

She waved that aside. Conscious or not, historians never hear anything they don’t want to. ‘I need you to do me a favour.’

I sighed. ‘I wondered why you’d adopted the conciliatory approach.’

‘The what?’

‘You know. The conciliatory approach.’ I adopted a typically historian falsetto. ‘*Oh, Markham, how lovely to see you. Thank you for obeying my peremptory summons. You’re looking very handsome today. Have a grape.*’

Being an historian was hurting my throat so I reverted to my usual voice – mellifluous but masculine. ‘A bit of a revolutionary concept for you, but have you ever tried... oh, I don’t know... actually being *nice* to the people you want to do something for you?’

‘*I am* being nice to you. It’s not my fault you’re too thick to notice.’

I decided to move the conversation on before she demonstrated her niceness by walloping me round the side of the head with something heavy, or I just strangled her.

‘What do you want, Max?’

‘I want... I’d *like* you to do me a favour.’

‘Yes, we’ve covered that.’

She addressed me in what she probably imagined was a conciliatory tone.

‘Would you like a grape?’

‘I am Head of the Security Section,’ I said with dignity. ‘The calls on my time are many and important. Can we get a move on, please?’

She made a rude noise and shifted uncomfortably in her bed and I remembered she was an invalid and I should probably be nice to her, not least because if she suffered some sort of relapse then we’d have Hunter in here and everything would turn out to be my fault again.

‘Do you need anything?’ I said, effortlessly showing her how conciliatory *should* be done. ‘Pillows plumping? Glass of water? Bedpan?’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Well, I’m visiting the sick and that’s what you do.’

‘You come near me with a bedpan and I’ll shout for Hunter.’ She threw a grape at me and it stung.

I rubbed my cheek and told her it was a good job she wasn’t on the active list and therefore revenge was, temporarily, off the table.

‘Anyway, what’s this assignment all about? For a start, is it even legal?’

‘What do you care?’ She passed me the file. ‘But yes, Dr Bairstow has cleared it and his initials are on the assignment sheet if you want proof.’

I flipped through the file. ‘Who’s going?’

‘Peterson and Lingoss – in their capacity as the brains of the team.’

Well, that was hurtful. ‘Anyone else?’

‘Miss North and Miss Sykes.’

‘Bloody hell, Max. Cruel and unusual.’

‘Clerk and Prentiss are on leave and Atherton and Bashford are at Whitehall, watching Elizabeth Fry address Parliament.’

‘Why?’

‘Because,’ she said with exaggerated patience, ‘if you want to see anyone address Parliament then you have to go to Whitehall, don’t you? Tell me again how you came to be Head of Security.’

‘Merit and achievement,’ I said, loftily. ‘As opposed to the workings of the History Department, who generally promote the last person left alive and then buy in a new lot. Anyway, what’s the rush?’

‘No particular rush,’ she replied innocently. ‘But it’s the duty of every department head to adhere to their authorised schedule and with me stuck in here I don’t want us getting too far behind.’

‘Good job you didn’t fall on your arse,’ I said. ‘Otherwise you might not have been able to talk out of it.’

For a moment I thought I might end up wearing the entire fruit bowl but then she remembered she wanted something from me and slid her eyes from side to side in the manner of one suffering nystagmus. I stared at her, wondering if she’d inadvertently inhaled something from R&D – trust me, that has happened – and whether I should summon aid.

Looking over her shoulder, she whispered, ‘There’s no one else here, is there?’

Well, of course there bloody wasn’t, but falling off the roof had given her a pretty major concussion so, just to show willing, I got up and looked under the bed.

‘Nope – no one here but us chickens.’

‘The thing is ...’ she said, trying to shunt a little closer.

‘Yes?’

‘The thing is...’

‘Oh, for God’s sake, Max, if you don’t get a move on, your bones will have knitted and then you can lead the assignment yourself. In fact, that’s a brilliant idea. You lead the assignment and I’ll get on with the rest of my life.’

She ignored all of that. ‘The thing is ...’

‘Oh God, are we back to that again?’

‘Keep your voice down or we’ll have Hunter in here wanting to know what’s going on.’

‘And she won’t be the only one.’

‘All right. All right.’ She looked around again as if someone might have slipped into the room while we were talking and were even now concealing themselves in the wardrobe.’

To show I was not to be trifled with, I folded my arms and waited.

‘Well...’ she said reluctantly. ‘It’s Peterson.’

She sat back as if that explained everything.

I said cautiously, ‘Yes...?’

‘Well... you know.’

It’s at times like this my heart goes out to Leon. He’s a nice bloke and all the poor sod ever wants is a quiet family life and I’m not sure that’s ever going to happen because, sadly for him, one third of his family is usually batting up and down the timeline leaving a trail of devastation in her wake and another third is living in the future under the *probably* benign protection of the Time Police. Of course, he can kick considerable arse when necessary and when Leon speaks, people listen. I listen. Even Max listens.

I sighed, because thinking the word ‘family’ was opening up a whole can of worms for me and, if badly handled, things were not going to turn out well. Hunter wasn’t saying anything but I knew she was worrying. As was I – and that’s not something I often admit to. This whole family stuff is a bit of a bugger, you know. No wonder Leon always looked so frazzled – although admittedly, a lot of that is down to the History Department’s treatment of his beloved pods. And it wasn’t as if I’d signed anything – I’d been told any document like that would be unenforceable anyway, but there had been a very hefty hint that I shouldn’t be contaminating the gene pool if I knew what was good for me.

I sighed again. Time to assert Security Section authority otherwise we’d be here all day waiting for the History Department to use its words.

‘No, Max, I don’t know what you mean. I don’t know anything. I knew nothing when I came in, I know even less now and, unless you get a move on, I shall go to my grave – an event probably not that far away – still knowing nothing.’

She lay back on her pillows giving me the injured historian look. They can all do it. I think they practice in front of mirrors. We stared at each other like a couple of cats until I realised I could be here all day at this rate and folded like a broken deckchair. ‘What about Peterson?’

She fiddled with a bit of sheet and I realised she wasn’t messing about. She was really struggling. And she’d been injured. Falling off the roof doesn’t do you any good at all and I should know. Besides, I had a pretty good idea of what this was all about, really.

‘He came to visit me yesterday.’

I nodded encouragingly. ‘Yes...?’

‘I’m... a bit worried.’

‘About Peterson?’

She nodded. ‘He needs a distraction.’

It isn’t often I find myself in agreement with the History Department but, in this instance, she was spot on. If anyone needed a distraction – it was Peterson.

‘Hence this assignment,’ I said.

‘That’s right. And it is genuine. Lingoss applied for it through the correct channels.’

‘Yes, I know. I was there at the time.’

I was, too. Around about the end of every year, Max puts the word out that she can be bought and toddles off to plan the coming year’s assignments. There’s the stuff Thirsk wants us to do – which gets priority since the University of Thirsk are, nominally, our overlords and we’re supposed to do their bidding. There’s other bits and pieces left over from previous assignments, follow-up jumps and so on, but, every now and then, some lucky sod gets an opportunity to check out one of their own personal favourites and this year it had been Miss Lingoss and – and no surprise here – she’d requested a chance to attend the very first public demonstration of a steam-pump – the ‘water-commanding engine’ as it was known, built by Edward, Lord Herbert, son of the Earl of Worcester and first shown to the world at Raglan Castle.

I had been with Max at the time when she – Lingoss, I mean – had bounced through the door. Her hair was blue that day – to curry favour with the History Department, I suppose – and she had the usual R&D *you’ll love this because it’s going to be amazing* expression. The one that’s nearly always a precursor to explosions, casualties, the emergency services and another telephone call from the chief constable.

Anyway, she’d interrupted two departmental heads in the midst of a complex and important decision-making process – we were trying to sort out what to have for lunch – and she handed Max a data stick.

‘Am I too late?’

‘You certainly are,’ I said. ‘It’s toad-in-the-hole for Max and lasagne with extra lasagne for me.’

I don’t think she was listening. R&D tend to occupy their own position in the spacetime continuum and expect everyone else to keep up.

‘What’s this?’ said Max, turning the data stick over in her hand.

‘Oh,’ she said, oozing what R&D would refer to as enthusiasm and everyone else would call reckless fanaticism. ‘I heard you were doing next year’s assignments and I thought – you know – if there’s time, people might enjoy this one. A nice day out. A chance to relax and see something interesting. Open to everyone, of course. I thought it would

be ideal for us. A chance to see the very first steam-engine – it pre-dated Savery, Watt and Newcomen, you know – and there's no violence, no one dies, and we could have a bit of a picnic in the sunshine. What do you think? Max?'

Max was staring at the data stick, turning it over and over. Her head had obviously wandered off to wherever it is historians go to do their thinking. I recognised the signs of an historian with an idea. The best thing you can do is leave them to get on with it either before the smell of burning becomes unbearable and they self-combust, or you get roped into something unpleasant and/or illegal.

I stood up. 'Max? Lunch?'

'Oh. Yes. Of course. Right. Yes. Mm,' she said. 'Well, obviously I'll have to see if there's room in the schedule, Miss Lingoss. You've left it a bit late, so don't get your hopes up.'

'OK,' she said cheerfully and bounced out of the door. Max continued to regard the data stick in a manner rather similar to one either having a eureka moment or anticipating a massive bowel movement. Recognising the signs, I headed to the door because lasagne was beckoning – as it frequently did.

Anyway, I'd forgotten all about that little episode and now it had reared its ugly head again. Lingoss and her data stick, I mean, not the lasagne. Max had obviously managed to find room in the official schedule, talked the Boss into giving it his approval, and was now threatening me with death should something go wrong with what was actually a very minor assignment. It was beginning to dawn on me that something was going on here. We in the Security Section are by no means as dense as people hope, you know.

Back to the present and a strangely inarticulate historian. I took pity on her and shunted my chair a little closer. 'What's the problem?'

She looked at me and said, bluntly, 'I told you. Peterson.'

Time to recap a little. We'd had a bad year. Max, in particular, had had a very bad year. She'd nearly died in a fire at Persepolis, been marooned in the 14th century for some considerable time, managed to expose herself to some sort of hallucinogenic drug – although for her that might actually have been a slight improvement – and then fallen off the roof with the late and very unlamented Miss Dottle. Peterson's ... well, girlfriend, I suppose you could call her. Only Dottle had turned out to be a traitor and working with that bastard Ronan – on whom the Time Police still haven't managed to lay their hands, by the way, although that might be down to the fact that he'd been living on our roof and we hadn't noticed. Anyway, Dottle's treachery had been exposed and there was a nasty scene up on the roof. To save himself, Ronan had shot Dottle and she fell off the roof, taking Max with her. Max survived – Dottle didn't.

All this had come as a huge shock to Peterson, still not completely recovered from Helen Foster's murder. To put it bluntly, a bloke can only handle so many dead girlfriends. These days, he was going about his usual business – walking and talking – and, to those who didn't know him well, apparently completely over things. Except he wasn't. I could see he was struggling and obviously Max could as well. I began to have an inkling of what all this was about.

I moved my chair even closer and said, 'Just spit it out, Max.'

'The thing is,' she said, 'I've had a brilliant idea.' And it was a measure of my concern for both her and Peterson that I didn't groan and roll my eyes. 'Do you remember? The night they told me Leon might still be alive ...?'

I did remember. She and Peterson had overcome their respective inarticulacy and embarrassment and been all set for a quiet evening out together. Not a date as such – the pair of them were so useless it would probably have taken them years to work up to date status – but a tiny step forward in what had been a very dark time for both of them. And then the news had come in about Leon and Peterson was back in his own lonely world again.

Not looking at me, she continued. 'Well, I thought ... that night of all nights ... when I had to leave so suddenly ... that it wouldn't be a good thing for him to be alone, and I didn't have much time and the first person I saw was Lingoss.'

'Wouldn't have been my first choice,' I said cheerfully.

'Well, it wouldn't have been mine, either, because let's face it, she's a bit ... well, you know ... weird ... but now I think it might have turned out to be an enormous piece of luck. And then, after you'd arrested Dottle, Lingoss went in to talk to him – you know, to keep him out of the way. *And* she had the sense to bring him in here while you were trying to get the body out of the tree. And I suspect they've been seeing quite a bit of each other ... nothing romantic, but she seems to be able to reach him and ... perhaps I'm being stupid ... I don't know ...'

'Prevent him from topping himself,' I said, bluntly.

She nodded and a tear slid down one cheek. 'It's not going to come to that, is it?'

I shoved the box of tissues at her. 'Not if I can help it. Do I gather you have a plan?'

'Well, yes, I have, but I'm stuck here – although I'll have my walking casts on soon and then I'll be mobile, but I'm not sure it's a good idea to wait that long ... and Matthew's coming for a visit soon so I'll be busy ... and then I thought of you.'

'And a very good thought it was, too,' I said, lying through my teeth. 'Er ... what exactly did you want me to do?'

'Well that's it – I'm not sure. I was going to take them out on this

assignment – this nice, low-risk assignment – throw them together and then just ... wing it.'

'Wing what?'

'The *assignment*. And now, I'm stuck here and, obviously, someone will have to accompany North and Sykes – if only to prevent them killing each other – but I thought Peterson and Lingoss could spend a quiet afternoon together and we could ... just ... see what happens.'

Time to inject a note of realism into this romantic fantasy. 'With a 17th-century steam-pump in the vicinity? Are you insane?'

She was most indignant. 'No. I've been tested. As far as I can discover, the steam-pump demonstration was a huge success. As Lingoss herself said, "Nothing blows up and no one dies." I thought we could take a picnic – it was a bit of a social event, apparently – and just enjoy ourselves. And the castle is magnificent and the grounds are lovely. We'll get a snapshot of 17th-century life before the Civil War kicks off, Lingoss gets to see the first steam-engine, Peterson gets an afternoon away from St Mary's, North and Sykes get an opportunity to bond – what could possibly go wrong?'

I suspected she was being a little over-optimistic there – or possibly her medication had further loosened her already tenuous grasp on reality. Always a possibility.

On the other hand, it was hard to see what disaster could possibly befall us and a nice, quiet and, above all, successful assignment was just what the unit needed. We could keep it low profile security-wise. I'd take Evans along. He could keep an eye on the Deadly Duo, Sykes and North, and, with the subtlety and discretion for which I'm famed, I'd take on Peterson and Lingoss. Give them a little time together. On their own. Without the usual St Mary's distractions. Yeah – that would work.

I nodded. 'OK.'

She let out her breath in a sigh of relief. 'Thank you. You probably won't have to do anything much. Just ... you know ... keep an eye on them.'

I nodded. 'Right – that's those two sorted. What about you?'

She looked up in surprise. 'What about me? I'm absolutely fine.'

Presumably she'd been stricken with temporary blindness and deafness and couldn't see the bandages, or the casts, or the bruises, or hear the medical equipment bleeping away and so on. The St Mary's definition of 'absolutely fine' is a very broad one.

I gestured. 'I don't mean all this. I mean ...' I stopped and said quietly, 'Is everything OK with you and Leon?' and knew at once I'd scored a bull's-eye. She turned bright red and the machines began to bleep faster. *Shit*. Any second now we'd have Hunter in here, smiting her enemies hip and thigh and generally blaming me for everything.

We both waited anxiously, watching the door until things calmed

down a little. I passed Max some water and said, 'Don't tell me if you don't want to,' because I've found that if you say that people generally fall over themselves to gabble their darkest secrets at you.

Not this time. She nodded and said, 'OK, I won't,' and I thought *bugger*.

'Is it Matthew?' I asked casually, taking her water off her. 'Is Leon not happy about him being with the Time Police?' and watched the machines. No reaction. So not Matthew then. Try another tack, Markham.

'Mind you, I was watching him the other day. Leon, I mean. He's getting around OK now, isn't he? Hardly needs his stick at all, does he?' And watched her readings spike again.

So – the problem was connected with Leon. Hmm ...

The read-outs began to settle back down again and I looked back to her politely smiling face – her *expressionless* politely smiling face – the one that gives away far more than she ever realises and put two and two together. Leon had been badly injured at Constantinople. Very badly injured. Well, the three of us had. I was back to what passed for normal. Major Guthrie was up and moving around. And so was Leon. Or so I had thought. He seemed fine, but some things take longer to heal than others. I wondered if anyone else knew about this. I doubted it. This was Max and she doesn't talk to people. Well, she does – actually she never *stops* talking at you – but not about the really important stuff. Never about the really important stuff. And she wouldn't have spoken to Peterson because he was in his own dark place at the moment. Actually, we all were. Max, Peterson and me. We were all in a dark place.

I looked back at her, saw the anxiety in her eyes and swallowed down what I had been going to say. She doesn't deal well with sympathy and she had enough on her plate at the moment. And if I made her cry then Hunter would probably do the same to me.

I smiled at her as she attractively wiped her nose on the sheet. 'Of course I'll do it. It'll be a doddle. Just leave everything to me.'

Next on my list of people to visit was the main subject of this morning's conversation, Deputy Director Peterson, temporary Head of the History Department. I bounced into his office just as Mrs Shaw was lovingly pouring him a cup of tea. In a pretty cup. With a saucer. And laying out two chocolate Hobnobs. I lunged but she was too quick for me.

A brief pause here. It's just occurred to me that Peterson has an assistant – the lovely Mrs Shaw; Max has one – the dreaded Rosie Lee; but I don't. Why not? I'm a Head of Department, too. I should have an assistant. Perhaps I should approach Mrs Partridge and ask if I too could have someone to bring *me* tea and biscuits. Hmm ... definitely something to think about later ...

Anyway, back to the temporary Head of the History Department, shunting paper around his desk and trying to look important.

I said good morning, maintaining the standards of politeness and decency for which I wish the Security Section is famous. ‘Did you know you’re down for the steam-pump jump?’

He dropped a pile of papers on the floor – the traditional St Mary’s filing system – and looked up. ‘Is that Lingoss and her water-commanding engine?’

‘That’s the one.’

‘Then yes. You?’

‘The Security Section will be playing a major part in the success of this assignment, obviously. Who’s doing the briefing now Max isn’t around?’

‘Me. This afternoon, in her office. Who else are you putting forward?’

‘Just Evans, I think. There’s no immediate threat that I can identify, so as long as you historians can play nicely together, we can keep a low profile.’

‘I’m astonished any of you have any idea of the meaning of the phrase.’

‘Says the department who gave us the exploding pig, the exploding rocks, the exploding wine ...’

‘Isolated incidents,’ he said, dismissing these actually quite spectacular events with a careless nonchalance perfected by frequent practice. ‘Nothing the Security Section need worry its pretty little head over. Why are you here anyway?’

‘Lunch and to report on Max.’

‘Oh yes, how is she?’

‘Fretting.’

He sat still for a moment and then got up and closed the door. ‘Can we have a word?’

‘Of course,’ I said, wondering how many more people would want a word with me this morning.

‘The thing is ...’ he said – so that was two of them at it. Perhaps it’s a History Department thing. Perhaps they just can’t help themselves.

I said impatiently, ‘What is this “thing”?’ Because it was lunchtime and I was hungry and someone had to put a conversational bomb up the History Department’s inarticulate arse otherwise we’d still be here this time next week.

He said, ‘I’m worried about Max. I mean it’s great that Leon’s not dead and he’s better every day, but they still haven’t got Matthew back and then she was shot and fell off the roof and I know she says it’s just a couple of broken bones ...’

‘And a gunshot wound ...’

‘And a gunshot wound, but ...’ He petered out. Sorry – no pun intended there.

‘Well,’ I said briskly, ‘I think the best thing we can do for her is to keep calm, carry on, and get a successful assignment under our belts.’

He nodded, staring down at his desk.

To give him a moment, I stared out of the window and then said casually, ‘Of course, it’s not going to be an easy assignment. We’ll have Sykes and North crammed together in a small space. To say nothing of Connie Lingoss and a steam-pump. What could possibly ...?’

‘Don’t call her that,’ he said, quite angrily for him. ‘I can’t think where that stupid nickname came from. Her name’s Felix.’

‘Is it?’ I said, quite pleased with the result of my little experiment. We in the Security Section have a wide variety of interrogation techniques, you know. And of resisting interrogation, as well. Years of facing Dr Bairstow over his desk have honed my skills to genius level. Unless the interrogator is Hunter, of course, in which case I might as well save myself a great deal of time and effort and just tell her everything as quickly as possible. ‘That’s a nice name. Pretty and unusual. A bit like Lingoss herself.’

But he had himself back under control again. ‘Are you going to stand around chuntering on about girls’ names all day? I want my lunch.’

‘Right behind you,’ I said, following him out.

I love the way the History Department thinks it’s responsible for planning these little jaunts. Personally, I think someone just thinks of a date, sticks a pin in a map, they all bundle themselves into a pod and spend the next forty-eight hours uttering cries of ‘Wow! This is amazing!’ and escaping death by the skin of their teeth.

There’s a lot more to it than that. Admittedly this was a fairly minor assignment, but that didn’t mean we in the Security Section could shirk our responsibilities. Evans was waiting for me after lunch, armed with mission folders and data sticks and so on, and we sat down in my office and went through the assignment. Moment by moment. Starting with where and when we were landing, what we could expect to see, what was going to happen and so on. We read through Dr Dowson’s background notes for the historical perspective and then discussed what could go wrong, what was likely to go wrong, what would definitely go wrong and so on, moment by moment, all the way through to the hopefully successful conclusion.

As far as we could see, there wasn’t a lot to worry about except for the moment they fired up the pump and it started squirting water into the air. Apparently, it was a bit noisy and caused some consternation among the watchers, not least a bunch of Protestants who happened to be visiting the castle to check for illegal weapons.

‘Why?’ said Evans, puzzled.

‘The Somersets were Catholics,’ I said. ‘Not allowed.’

‘And did they?’

‘Did they what?’

‘Have illegal weapons?’

‘How should I know? Probably. Everyone else did. And they were very pro-king. Anyway,’ I said, remembering the secondary and not publicly known part of the assignment, ‘you’ll have Sykes and North ...’ – he groaned – ‘... and I’ll take Peterson and Lingoss.’

‘Why?’

‘There’s a steam-pump,’ I said, patiently. ‘And Miss Lingoss. Together. In the same place. At the same time.’

‘A good point,’ he said. ‘I definitely think you should take that one, boss.’

We held the briefing in Max’s office. There was me, Peterson, Lingoss, North, Sykes and Evans. We brought our own tea. Max might occasionally be able to get tea and biscuits out of Rosie Lee but no one else was even going to try. She sat triumphantly at her desk, pretending to take notes.

Peterson explained the assignment.

‘Right, people. Raglan Castle. Home of Henry, Earl of Worcester. A very rich and prominent Catholic family. It’s 1641 and the country is dividing – Parliament versus the king, Catholic against Protestant, family against family. It’s all going to kick off in a year or so but not yet. Our purpose will be to witness the first public demonstration of the first steam-engine, built by the eldest son, Edward, Lord Herbert. He’s a bit of a clever bugger – although not clever enough to make any money out of his inventions. He was broke when he died. A bit ahead of his time, possibly.

‘Now then – we’ll all be in Number Six. Miss North and Miss Sykes, you’ll team up with Mr Evans. I want you to get as much background footage as you can. It’s a major social event and we want to be able to identify as many members of the pre-Civil War aristocracy as possible. Also, get some footage of the castle – it’s at the height of its power and influence. The buildings are magnificent and there are extensive gardens and orchards – all of which will be rooted out to clear lines of sight for the cannon, and the castle itself will suffer some slighting, so this will be our last chance to see it in all its glory.

‘Speaking of which, Miss North, I believe you’ve prepared a quick background on the political situation at the time.’

‘Thank you, sir.’ She stood up. ‘I think it’s important to bear in mind that no one sets out to have a civil war. No one sets out to overthrow the monarchy or start a revolution. Events just ... escalate. The main

causes are money and religion – as they usually are. The king is continually forced to apply to Parliament for funds they are reluctant to grant, so in 1629 he dismisses Parliament completely and attempts to go it alone.’

‘Fat lot of good that did him,’ said Sykes, disparagingly. ‘He had to recall Parliament in the end; they weren’t happy and all he’d managed to do was alienate a lot of people who might otherwise have supported him.’

‘And religion,’ continued North, apparently ignoring her. Sykes and North were polar opposites. North came from a privileged background – Sykes was very proud of what she always referred to as her peasant origins. It was very possible that back in the mists of time, some of North’s ancestors had hanged some of Sykes’ ancestors for poaching. Neither had any difficulty disliking the other. Sometimes their disagreements were quite amusing. Other times – less so.

‘There’s always religion behind civil unrest,’ said Sykes.

‘The conflict between Protestant and Catholic was Europe-wide,’ persevered North, ‘and certainly not confined to England. There’s no doubt that Catholics were unpopular and widely distrusted ...’

‘It wasn’t that long since Bloody Mary had attempted to burn the Protestants out of existence,’ interrupted Sykes. ‘And there were still people alive who would remember the Spanish Armada.’

‘The king had a right to rule,’ snapped North in exasperation, slapping her notes onto the table.

‘Through Parliament.’

‘Who were corrupt and incompetent.’

‘Parliament’s always been corrupt and incompetent,’ said Sykes, scornfully. A remark which would certainly have had unfortunate consequences for her in the mid-17th century.

‘Enough,’ said Peterson, mildly, but they did shut up which was a bit of a relief. If they’d come to blows I’d have had to send in Evans to sort them out. ‘The rights and wrongs of Parliament and the king are for another day. To continue. Miss Lingoss and I will cover the purpose of the afternoon – the demonstration of the steam-engine. We’ll be escorted by Mr Markham. Miss Lingoss ...’ He turned to Lingoss, who was hardly able to sit still with excitement. ‘Would you like to give us a brief explanation of how the pump works and what we can expect to see?’

Well, of course she would, leaping to her feet and bombarding us with facts and figures, and bring up bewildering images of tanks and pipes and valves and God knows what. We all zoned out except for Peterson who regarded her with rapt attention and possibly only I knew he’d mastered the art of sleeping with his eyes open.

‘Thank you,’ he said, as she eventually wound down. ‘Most helpful. Everyone please report to Mrs Enderby for your costumes. We’ll be a

little more upmarket for this one. We're aiming for minor nobility. Not important enough to warrant any special attention, but too important to be challenged.'

'All of us?' I said, suspiciously.

He started shunting files around. 'Well, no, obviously we'll be attended by ... attendants.'

'You mean servants.'

'In a loose sense of the word, yes.'

I think I might have mentioned this before. The Security Section are always the servants. Or, depending on the time period, the slaves. Or the eunuchs. We struggle along at the back – and yes, I know that's the best position from which to keep an eye on things, but that's not the point. We're always the ones who have to wear the scratchy clothes and no drawers. We're the ones who have to carry the heavy loads. In the heat. Or the wet. I remember we went to Egypt once and I was the bloody slave and the bloody History Department nearly bloody killed me. Yes, accidentally, but that's not the point. I was in a right state when we got back. I could just see how this assignment was going to pan out. They'd all loll about on the grass eating picnics and being posh and noble and Evans and I would be racing around doing all the fetching and carrying and the buggers wouldn't even think to save us a sausage roll, some ghastly catastrophe would occur, we'd save the day as we always do, and not only would there be no bloody gratitude, but we'd be covered in ridicule because we were only the bloody servants.

I became aware of people looking at me and realised I might have said some of that out loud.

Peterson stared at me for a moment before saying, 'Of course. I hadn't realised ... I'll certainly have a word with Mrs Enderby.'

'Thank you,' I said, inclining my head in a manner nicely calculated to combine gratitude with dignity. As befitted my newly acquired status.

'Not a problem. Any questions anyone?'

They shook their heads.

'Right, report to Hawking at 09:00 Wednesday next. A copy of these notes to Max, please, Miss Lee. Thank you, everyone.'

My big mistake, of course, was to trust Peterson. If I had a concern it was that he would forget, but he didn't. I presented myself to Mrs Enderby who immediately said oh yes, Dr Peterson had had a word and they'd got something fixed up for me.

'A *male* costume,' I said, suddenly worried. It would be just like the History Department to have me tarted up like a pantomime dame.

'Of course,' she said, slightly startled. 'As you know, clothes were quite gorgeous in the 17th century, especially for the men, so we were rather able to go to town on you.'

I stopped. 'I won't have to wear a wig, will I?'

'Oh, no, I don't think so. Your hair is fine.'

No one at St Mary's has what could be called a military haircut. Everyone here has a lot of hair. Except for Dr Bairstow, of course. Nature's way of compensating, I suppose. We men have a kind of multi-purpose shag – which is not anything like as exciting as it sounds – that covers any number of centuries and female historians have hair half way down their backs. It looks good, but the downside is that we shed. There's more shedding at St Mary's than on a municipal allotment. We're always clogging up the drains. Mr Strong goes mad and rumour has it that Bashford occasionally goes so far as to cough up the odd hairball.

Our beards though were a different matter. The three of us, Peterson, Evans and me had had a bit of a competition to see who could grow the best Van Dyck. Evans had had his usual problem – for some reason his facial hair grows at different rates on each side of his face so he was going for the lopsided look. Being fair, Peterson's was too light to be very noticeable. Mine was – I need hardly say – magnificent. I'd caught Hunter admiring it several times. At least that was what she said she was doing. Well-shaped and neatly trimmed, combining manliness and impeccable grooming, I was the epitome of overwhelming masculinity. As I'd informed Peterson on several occasions.

My costume was pink.

That bastard Peterson was so dead.

'It's pink,' I said, deepening my voice several octaves in case anyone had got the wrong idea.

'It's rose,' she said soothingly. 'A very fashionable colour.'

'But pink is for girls.'

'Not in the 17th century. Pink wasn't associated with girls until around World War One. No one will think it's at all unusual. In fact, the colour really suits you.'

I stared at her suspiciously. Stitched up, if you'll excuse the expression, by Mrs Enderby. She stared guilelessly back again. Yes, she always looks very sweet, but you have to remember Wardrobe is part of the History Department, so I have some doubts.

Usually it's women's fashions that are preposterous and it's always funny to watch Max struggle with a corset or a bustle, but this time we men were suffering too. I've never seen so much lace. I had a huge lace collar which made me look like little Lord Fauntleroy and lace ruffles on my sleeves which fell over my hands. Still, they would give me something to blow my nose on. I had a short jacket which fell to a point and fastened with little girlie ribbons, if you can believe that. And don't even get me started on the breeches which were baggy and tied at the knee with yet more ribbons. Over all that I had a short cloak which I

could see was really going to get in my way and the whole ridiculous outfit was topped off with a wide-brimmed hat sporting an enormous pink feather.

I emerged from Wardrobe and the silence from everyone was more eloquent than if they'd fallen on the floor laughing.

'It's *rose*,' I said.

No one said a word.

Evans – of course – was cool and comfortable in a simple linen shirt, a sleeveless leather doublet, normal breeches, stockings and stout shoes. All in a rather nice shade of manly brown. We looked at each other.

'One of us looks like 17th-century Barbie,' he said. 'And it's not me.'

'It's *rose*.' Why was everyone having so much difficulty with that?

I told him to pick up the basket containing our lunch. I was pleased to see him stagger slightly. Mrs Mack obviously hadn't stinted on provisions.

I cast Mrs Enderby one long, last, reproachful look – which she didn't appear to notice at all – and followed everyone down the long corridor to Hawking. The leather boots had those stupid turn-down tops and walking wasn't easy.

We gathered outside Number Six and Evans and I took the opportunity to give them all one last security check for watches or whatever. I can only think they'd had some sort of collective neural event in Wardrobe. Normally we go for the middle of the road 'not rich enough to rob but too prosperous to kick' image. Not today. Today, we were doing colour. Big time.

Most prominent was Lingoss in pale orange.

'Apricot,' muttered Evans.

'What?'

'Apricot. It's apricot, not orange.'

'Who set you up as fashion expert?' I demanded, because the pink still rankled.

'No one. It's in Wardrobe's briefing notes. Good job she ditched the blue hair. Would have looked awful. Blue and orange. Opposite sides of the colour spectrum and ...'

'Will you piss off?'

He grinned and moved away and I decided it was time to make winding up senior officers a capital offence. Starting with him. And I'd backdate it. But he was right. I don't know whether it was her natural colour or just something she'd grabbed out of a bottle last night, but Lingoss's chestnut hair was dressed in soft curls that framed her face and looked ... normal. Well, as normal as any woman can look when decked out in twenty yards of orange ... sorry, apricot ... fabric.

Standing next to her, Sykes was in pale blue, with a short, elaborately embroidered jacket very similar to mine, tied with ribbons

down the front and a huge, wide skirt. A little distance away, as usual, North was regal in gold. She looked the most at ease, as well. The rest of us resembled children dressing up in adult's clothing, but she comes from a long line of aristocrats who actually wore this sort of clothing as they presided over hunting peasants for sport or using criminals as firewood. They all had corkscrew curls, the fashionable narrow back, the high waist, puffed sleeves tied above and below the elbow, and huge wide skirts.

'Don't know how we're going to get them all in,' muttered Evans, back alongside me. 'The pod's not that big.'

Peterson joined us, looking noble and serious in dark blue. Less collar, fewer ruffles, smaller feather and no pink. I glowered suspiciously.

'Nice,' he said, looking me up and down. 'Suits you, sir.'

Leon emerged from the pod. 'All set,' he said. 'Ready whenever you are. Good heavens!'

'It's *rose*,' I said, before he could say any more.

'You look like Puss in Boots.'

I put my hand on an imaginary sword. 'My name is Inigo Montoya. Prepare to die.'

'Straighten your hat, Mr Montoya.'

I grinned at him. 'Not enough ears. I can't keep it on straight.'

I'd once lost a bit of one ear in an unfortunate William Tell-related trauma. I didn't miss it and it certainly doesn't cause me any problems, but hats are sometimes a bit of a bugger.

He sighed and then we both watched Peterson trying to prise three very wide female historians through a narrow doorway. Like so much colourful toothpaste.

I noticed Peterson kept looking up at the gantry as if expecting someone. I looked up as well, half expecting to see her hanging over the rail or sitting in her wheelchair making rude gestures, but she wasn't there.

'Good luck,' said Leon, as I followed them in.

I shook my head. Sykes, North, Lingoss and a steam-engine. As Max had said – what could possibly go wrong?

It was a good job there weren't that many people on this assignment, but even so, Evans and I had to flatten ourselves against the locker doors in case we were smothered in silk.

'Right,' said Peterson. 'We all know why we're here.'

We nodded because we did, but it occurs to me that you don't, so, rather late in the day, I'd better explain.

We're St Mary's. By which I mean we work for the Institute of Historical Research at St Mary's Priory. I always say we're just outside Rushford if anyone ever wants to pop in, but no one ever does. The

purpose of St Mary's is to investigate major historical events in contemporary time. The purpose of the History Department is to enmire themselves in the deepest trouble at the earliest opportunity and the purpose of the Security Section is to unenmire them with speed, style and, if possible, success.

Using pods – carefully designed to resemble stone-built shacks which would be anonymous in any time period – we gallivant up and down the timeline, a comet tail of disaster and catastrophe trailing in our wake. Or investigating major historical events in contemporary time if you want the official definition.

The world might have gone white. I don't know. Peterson was the designated driver so I had my eyes shut. Our landing wasn't the softest. Fortunately, we were all old hands and everyone was well braced.

'Bloody hell,' I said, straightening my stupid hat. 'When are you ever going to get the hang of driving these things?'

'I don't understand it,' he said, staring at the read outs. 'It must be the Technical Section. I'm sure they've done something to the pods.'

In the interests of inter-departmental harmony, we all agreed that yes, the Technical Section had probably done something to the pods. I recommended he take it up with Leon on our return.

'Well,' he said, picking up his hat off the floor. 'Astonishingly, we seem to be in the right place at the right time. OK people, let's get cracking.'

We appeared to be on the outskirts of a small copse to the south-east of the Monmouth road. We could see Raglan church tower through the trees so we knew we weren't far away. We gathered our gear together, decontaminated and exited the pod to a hot, dusty, summer's day. Evans and I stood back and let them work through the traditional historian cries of wonder and enthusiasm. There was a lot of excited historian chatter about the church, the market cross with its enormous base, the people, the inn and so on. We'd discovered long ago that you just have to let them get it out of their systems.

Raglan village was tiny but bustling. Small wooden houses clustered around the market cross. Their beams were crooked with age and entire ecosystems were growing in the thatch. Picturesque to look at and hell to live in.

It was market day. Well, they were having a market anyway. I suspected the locals were taking advantage of events up at the castle. The open area was bordered by the church on one side, an inn on the other, and packed with makeshift tables. There were bolts of cloth carefully displayed. Metal and leather workers had laid out their goods. Behind a stall, a man in a thick leather apron was mending something I couldn't see. The smell of glue made my feather wilt. No wonder he

looked so cheerful. A well-dressed merchant stood guard over his spice table. No one touched anything without his permission. Alongside that stall, a young boy was throwing cold water over a tray of fish, trying to keep it cool in this hot weather. Not very successfully, by the smell of it.

A lot of stuff was laid out on the ground, including food – wilting greens, eggs and some very small green apples. A thin coating of dust was settling over everything – like grubby icing sugar.

The market place was packed with every sort of person from beggars to landed gentry. A crowd of giggling young women surrounded a pedlar with a tray full of colourful ribbons. Most were dressed in a much more restrained style than us. There were a lot fewer lace ruffles and feathers for a start. And definitely less pink. Darker colours prevailed among the poorer folk – as they often do because they don't show so much dirt. We did get a few looks as we strolled through the market, attracting not a little attention. I swear someone tittered.

'Tell them its rose,' said Evans from behind me, but I ignored him.

There were animals in pens all around. I could hear clucking and mooing and baaing and snorting and that was just my colleagues. Indignant hens fluttered in small wooden cages. The gutters ran with the product of agitated livestock, which on a hot day like this was quite pungent. People shouted over the din – to each other, to their animals and possibly even to themselves.

Across the road from the church, quite a large inn was doing a roaring trade. Men stood around outside, doing business, drinking or just sitting at rough wooden tables enjoying the sun. There were a lot of women about, moving around the market, either buying or selling, or, as Sykes pointed out, doing most of the work while the men stood idly by. Evans and I nodded. What else were women for?

In the distance, with its towers showing behind a slight rise, stood the castle itself, with colourful flags and pennants flying from every turret. Big and imposing, it dominated the landscape around it. And it was home to the country's first steam-engine. Speaking of which ...

'We need to chivvy them on,' said Lingoss to me, hopping from foot to foot. 'Otherwise we might miss the demonstration.'

She was worrying unnecessarily. There was no chance of missing anything. We weren't the only people heading towards the castle. A trail of horses, sedan chairs, litters, coaches and chattering pedestrians were showing us the way up the hill and towards the gatehouse.

I organised us into two respectable parties, nudging Evans towards North and Sykes. He was still reluctant and I actually had to nudge him quite hard, but with Max's death threats still ringing in my ears, I wanted Lingoss and Peterson for myself. Besides, I wasn't sure Evans had sufficient sensitivity and refinement for such an important part of the assignment. Well, no, actually, I'd once spent a very long six hours

as the back end of a pantomime reindeer with an egg-sandwich scoffing Evans at the front, and I *knew* he hadn't sufficient sensitivity and refinement for such an important assignment. Although he does have an enormous arse.

Looking back, I think I might have been a little high-handed in my efforts to ensure everyone was correctly partnered. Evans scowled horribly and made a big business of shouldering his heavy pack, which I ignored, but typically, while I was busy on his behalf, Peterson had offered his arm to Lingoss, and the next thing the two of them were half way up the hill, hastily followed by me, looking the dog's bollocks in rose. North and Sykes followed on behind and a smirking Evans brought up the rear.

We fell in behind a smart-looking sedan. The slope up to the castle wasn't that steep, but I wouldn't have cared to lug a chair up there in this heat. The two bearers were red-faced and streaming with sweat. Hell of a way to earn a living.

Interesting factette for anyone interested. If you've ever wondered why we Brits say, 'Cheerio,' it's because of sedan chairs. Back in days of yore, if you wanted to hire a chair you stood at the side of the road, arm in the air and calling thusly, 'Chair ho! Chair ho!' until one turned up and you piled in and were carted off to your destination. Obviously, over time, 'Chair ho!' was corrupted to 'Cheerio.' Which we still say today. Factette finished.

There were any number of chairs around but every single one of them was taken so we had no choice but to walk. Still, as Lingoss said, we were young and fit and it wasn't far. I think nearly everyone would have taken issue with that statement, had we had the breath.

The approach to the castle was impressive. As it was designed to be.

'Lovely day.' Peterson sniffed the air appreciatively. 'I've said it before – you can't beat the sweet smell of History in the morning.'

I was looking around. That's the difference between us and historians. They're standing around inhaling history and we're making sure the natives aren't attacking and no one's being eaten by a sheep.

I have to say – as castles go, this one was pretty cool. And big. Very, very big. 'I'm the biggest and most important thing for miles around,' it was saying. 'And don't you forget it.'

There was no air pollution to discolour the stone and the whole place glowed in the bright sunshine. The sky above was a fresh, clean blue, the grass glowed green. I squinted up at the towers, trying to make out the colours on the flags and banners, but the sun was so bright they were just dark against the sky. Everything was sunny and peaceful.

'This is going to be easy,' muttered Evans. 'We're really going to have to work hard to screw this one up, boss.'

I quelled him with a stern look. Or as stern a look as one can manage when clothed from head to toe in pink.

We stood before the outer gatehouse. The gates were open, the portcullises were up and people were flooding in. I'm not sure how formidable it was supposed to be – take it from me, some of the gun loops were in some very odd positions, but today it was the very epitome of welcoming hospitality. Some sort of high-ranking servant greeted everyone as they entered. Once through the outer gatehouse, however, a selection process kicked in. Stewards ushered people according to their rank. Top people – which we were not – were taken through the Pitched Court, into the Fountain Court, and from there across the bridge and into the great tower – the hexagonal Yellow Tower of Gwent – there to listen to music, partake of refreshments and watch events from the private apartments overlooking the moat.

Not us, though. There was the usual appraising but slightly puzzled look as we approached. No matter how flawless our costumes and hair, we never look quite right. We're out of our own time and it shows.

The middling sort – good enough to be allowed in but not good enough to be allowed *all* the way in – were being politely directed off to the left to find the access to the moat walk. We were obviously the middling sort. And believe me, that's a big step up for some of us.

The place was full of chattering, excited people, all looking forward to having a good nose around. Most people were dressed almost as we were, so top marks to Wardrobe again, although I noticed no one else was in pink. Sorry – rose. I estimated several hundred people altogether but scattered over a large area. Most of them seemed more interested in the formal gardens, the orchards and fish ponds, even the deer park. We, however, had Lingoss, who more than made up for any local apathy in the steam-engine department.

She was gazing up at the Great Tower. 'That's where the engine is. But we can't see it from here. We need to go further round.'

At some point, they'd built a broad, gravelled walkway around the moat, easily wide enough for the three of us to walk together but, tactfully, I hung back a little, pretending to admire ... something or other. I assumed this was a place for the ladies to exercise on the days when they lacked the strength to walk the hundred or so yards to the formal gardens. As if to reinforce my argument, benches were set against the wall in the sun, presumably to alleviate feminine fatigue, although I knew better than to mention this. Niches had been built into the walls to hold what I thought an excessive number of naked statues. No wonder the ladies had to rest so frequently. I couldn't help noticing that either the models had posed on very cold days or the masculine form had evolved somewhat over the last four hundred years. I didn't mention that, either.

The day was very warm and sunny and it was even warmer and sunnier down here. We strolled slowly – actually, in these clothes we had very little choice, admiring the fish swimming lazily through some of the dirtiest water I'd ever seen. The Yellow Tower of Gwent loomed high before us – and 'loomed' was exactly the right word for it, connected to the castle proper by an arched bridge. We could hear the sound of music and laughter coming from within. Everyone seemed in a really happy mood.

Especially Lingoss, staring in rapture at some sort of contraption affixed to the tower's outer wall. 'There,' she said in great excitement. 'There it is. Attached to the wall by the bridge. Can you see it?'

Of course we could see it. You couldn't miss it. I'd seen steam-pumps before, but usually the free-standing models. The sort that nod or pump or whatever, but this was a strangely vertical affair. A giant tank with vertical pipes running in and out had been set directly into the wall. A pile of rubble and broken bricks lay on the ground around it. I wondered what his dad had had to say about that. I don't think it had structurally weakened the wall any, but what father wants his kid hacking great holes into a load-bearing wall? That sort of thing doesn't go down well with most parents. A vast pile of wood lay nearby – to feed the engine, I assumed.

It was a lot bigger than I thought it would be and, to my non-R&D eye, looked like a giant tuning fork attached to an immersion heater. I decided not to mention that, either.

She didn't wait to be asked how it worked. 'They let steam into a sealed chamber, which then cools and creates a vacuum. This opens a valve connected to that pipe there, which pumps the water up from the moat into the empty chamber.'

We stood politely, pretending to listen. In fact, Peterson went one step further, nodding thoughtfully every other sentence. Always a sign that senior managers haven't got a clue what you're talking about.

She surged on. 'The valve closes and then they let in more steam which forces the water through another valve and into the second pipe and the pressure sends it up into the air. They reckoned the jet was about forty feet high and terrified the wits out of everyone.'

She beamed in eager anticipation of this happy event.

Peterson was palming his recorder, getting the establishing shots Miss Lingoss had forgotten in her excitement.

'Can we get any closer?' was obviously her next question.

'Well, we can try,' said Peterson, taking her arm and as he did so, I became aware of growing dissent in the ranks behind us.

Despite their pleasant surroundings, congenial colleagues, no siege weapons present, a lack of cholera and so on, North and Sykes had still managed to find something to argue about. I tuned in reluctantly. As

was appropriate, given that the family would support Charles I in the upcoming Civil War it would seem they'd got on to the Divine Right of Kings.

'He was *anointed*, cried North, with what was, for her, unusual emotion. 'You can't anoint a king with holy oil and then say, well yes, we know you've been selected by God, but actually Parliament says you can't do that. Or that. Or that. And we won't let you do that, either.'

'Parliament was the voice of the people,' contended Sykes, unarguably one of the people. 'And they said God and the law were more important than the king.'

'The king *represented* God and the law.'

'And should therefore abide by it.'

I tried to intervene. 'Will you two keep your voices down.'

And indeed, they were beginning to attract unwanted attention. This was a hotly debated topic throughout the country – but not in public. You never knew who might be listening. In our case – half the county by the looks of it. Although to be fair, I think it was the fact they were women with opinions rather than the opinions themselves.

North was unwilling to let it go. She gestured around. 'Well, thanks to Parliament, all this will be gone in a few years. The castle will be slighted, the gardens and orchards destroyed. And not just here at Raglan ...'

'The consequences of being on the losing side,' countered Sykes.

'It wasn't the losing side. Everyone hated the Commonwealth; the monarchy was restored almost the second Cromwell died and no one's trusted Parliament to rule without a monarch ever since.'

This was going too far. Discussions of the future within earshot of contemporaries was strictly forbidden.

Peterson wheeled around. 'Nobody minds you having opinions. You just don't have them here. Understood?'

They stopped dead. For Peterson to bollock anyone was a rare event. For Peterson to bollock anyone in public was unheard of. I didn't blame him though. They'd never have dared open their mouths if Max had been here.

For the maintenance of harmony, I told Evans to take them away and keep an eye on them. 'Any nonsense from either of them – shoot them,' I added, making sure they could hear every word.

They departed – each ostentatiously ignoring the other.

It would appear that while some, distrustful of all this new-fangled technology, were keeping their distance, there were other hardier and braver souls prepared to risk a closer look. Ancestors of R&D perhaps. More people were assembling and Miss Lingoss began to fret we'd miss something, so we gently elbowed our way to the front.

I stayed behind them, watching their backs. There was a lot of

excited chatter and pointing, and not all of it from Lingoss. The engine seemed set up and ready to go. Three men, grubby and wet, were fussing around and peering at things. One of them must be Lord Herbert. The dirtiest one, I guessed.

Once, when I was a little kid, I saw a steam train. It chuffed into Paddington Station with a great roar, steam belching everywhere, tooting its whistle and I thought it was wonderful. I still haven't given up hope of being an engine driver one day – but mostly, I remember the smell. Hot metal, hot coal, hot water. That was exactly what I was smelling now and the memories came flooding back. I could hear a faint hissing sound coming from the contraption, but it was nowhere near as impressive as the steam-engine at Paddington. I was actually rather disappointed. Still, give it a couple of hundred years ...

Something was happening. I could see heads turning to look up towards the bridge that connected the tower to the rest of the castle.

Slowly people stopped talking and looked. Even Lingoss stopped talking and looked.

I leaned forwards to speak to Peterson. 'Is this what I think it is?'

He nodded and I stepped back and called up Evans. 'Mr Evans?'

'Yes, sir?'

'It's all about to kick off here. What are you doing?'

'Watching the newcomers approach, sir. There's a party of six to eight men, all dressed in black. Very sombre. They're all on foot so probably local. They're walking straight in as if they own the place. There's a castle official approaching. Several officials, in fact. It's all very formal. No one's taken their hats off. They're being whisked straight into the castle – no messing. You should be able to catch sight of them appearing on the bridge at any moment now.'

'Stay with them if you can, Mr Evans.'

They hadn't yet appeared but we could hear them. Their loud, harsh voices seemed very much out of place in this elegant setting. These would be the Protestant inspectors, insisting on carrying out their check for illegal weapons and determined not to be overawed by their surroundings. They didn't know it, but they were in for a bit of a shock. And serve them right. Why would they choose today unless it was an attempt to embarrass the Somersets? If that was indeed their aim then it was about to backfire spectacularly.

I couldn't help wondering what constituted an illegal weapon. This was a castle, for heaven's sake. There must be any number of cannon, pikes, muskets, longbows, and swords all over the place. It's what castles are for.

Heads were turning and hats were doffed. This must be Henry Somerset himself, Earl of Worcester, wearing dark red and escorted by just enough of his household to impress without being ostentatious. He

walked very slowly across the bridge, doing an excellent impersonation of a man reluctant to leave his guests, but doing his duty nevertheless. He paused on the bridge to lean over and exchange a few words with the man I had assumed to be his son, Lord Herbert, as he fiddled with his engine ten feet or so below him. And then, having made them wait just long enough, he approached the little posse of black-clad spoilsports waiting on the bridge.

I looked at the people around. All conversation had stopped. Fear was written on every face. These were treacherous times. The battle lines were not yet drawn, but all across the country, sides were being chosen. This was a Royalist stronghold. Both the earl and his son would declare for the king. Did those around us wonder if being here today would tar them with the same brush? It occurred to me that only we knew why the Protestant delegation was here. For everyone else it was just an unpleasant reminder that the harsh realities of the world never really go away. No matter how pleasant the surroundings, the real world has a nasty habit of intruding.

Things were moving, however. Lord Herbert, sensibly clad in brown and not pink, was fussing around his engine and issuing a series of instructions. His assistants sprang into action. I suspected they'd been waiting for this moment. That the earl had somehow known in advance of the delegation and decided to give them a front row seat for the demonstration of his son's water-commanding engine. Naughty, but understandable.

Herbert shouted. Something hissed. A man shouted back. The hissing noise increased. Like a herd of St Mary's swans. Lord Herbert raised his arm.

A shiver of excitement and apprehension ran through the crowd. I didn't blame them. Lingoss was craning her neck for a better view, although, apart from the thirty feet of scummy water between us and them, she couldn't have been any closer.

Lord Herbert lowered his arm. Someone shouted. The two men heaved on some sort of lever and a great roaring cloud of white steam belched into the air. Women screamed. I think some men did as well.

Evans and I had read contemporary accounts in which they'd described the sound 'as if all the devils in hell had risen up' and that was exactly what it sounded like. I don't know if a valve had stuck, if it was a safety feature – rather unlikely I thought in these pre-health and safety days – or whether it was intentional, but a hideous, ear-splitting, shrieking whistle echoed across the moat, reverberating from wall to wall in this enclosed space, causing people to cover their ears, scream all over again, drop to the ground or try to run away. With a massive clanking noise, the pipes attached to the wall rattled so violently I thought they would come away, possibly bringing part of the wall down

with them.

For long seconds, nothing happened – except for ‘all the devils of hell’ giving it what for, of course – and then, with a mighty gurgling, gargling whoosh, a great jet of water leaped out of the pipe, high into the air. Higher than the tower itself. A beautiful fountain of water, dark against the sky. Although that was probably because of the colour of the water. I was pretty sure they were pumping almost neat fish shit.

Beautiful or not, it hung for a moment, reflecting the light from the sun, and then cascaded downwards to splash back into the moat again. The fish fled. The smell of stagnant water was awful. The noise was worse. Somewhere over there, the Protestants, probably having no clue what was going on, were fleeing for their lives. Over here, people were milling around in a dreadful panic, knocking into one another in their efforts to get out of the way. I was being buffeted on all sides.

It was time.

I took a deep breath, put my hand in the small of Lingoss’s back and pushed. As gently as I could. It didn’t take much. She teetered on the edge for a moment, arms flailing and then, with a scream that was lost in the shriek of the steam-engine, she fell some ten feet down into the moat, hitting the water with the most enormous splash and disappearing almost immediately, dragged down by the weight of her massive skirt.

Yes, yes, I know, but in my own defence, my plan was for Peterson to jump in and rescue her. I was waiting for him to be the hero of the hour. I thought he’d pull her out to general acclaim and admiration. Especially from Lingoss.

Nothing happened. I turned to where he’d been standing, all ready to hold his hat and boots while he did heroic things, and he wasn’t there.

What?

I spun around and around. The bastard had disappeared. I couldn’t see him anywhere. I’d pushed Lingoss into the moat so he could save her and the bastard wasn’t here.

And now we were in big trouble because normally when this sort of thing happens the trapped air causes a person’s skirt to balloon up around them, which acts as a kind of flotation device, but Lingoss had fallen in head first and the weight of all her clothes was dragging her down.

I’d really got this wrong. Lingoss was sinking like a brick. Peterson definitely didn’t need another dead girlfriend. And I didn’t even want to contemplate what would happen to me if anything happened to Lingoss.

Men were calling to each other and women were screaming all over again.

Peering down into the water I could just make out a sodden ball of pale silk below the surface. She was sinking fast. Oh God – I’d killed Lingoss.

I still couldn't see Peterson anywhere and I had to do something fast. I ripped off my stupid hat, kicked off my boots and jumped in.

As I hit the water, I realised it would have been a good idea to have taken off my cloak as well, because it was soaked in a moment. The weight was dragging me down as well, wrapping itself around me and impeding my every move. Why anyone would choose to wear such bloody stupid clothes was beyond me.

Fortunately, it was loosely laced at my throat and I was able to pull it up over my head. Unfortunately, that took a few seconds and by the time I could see again, Lingoss had completely disappeared.

People were shouting and pointing to where she'd gone under. No one was leaping in to assist. Perhaps people in this age couldn't swim. I took a deep breath and dived down into the cold, dark water.

I found her almost immediately. Some portion of her clothing swirled past me and I grabbed it. She was struggling like a maniac – or drowning, as she later described it – and not helping me at all. Her struggles were pulling us both down. It occurred to me she probably didn't know which way up she was. I took a firmer hold of her skirt and yanked three times. She got the message – bright girl, our Lingoss – and ceased trying to drown the pair of us.

I tugged again and felt her arm brush mine. I grabbed hold and kicked out towards the light.

My head broke water almost immediately. We hadn't actually been that deep, but it took me an age to disentangle her dress so I could get her head above water. I scrabbled away at the wet fabric with one hand, trying to keep us both afloat with the other and, eventually, she emerged from a cocoon of wet material, coughing and gasping for breath. Her hair was plastered to her face and blood was running sluggishly from a small cut over one eye. I tried to clear her mouth and nose of weed and she began to struggle again. I guessed her legs were entangled and she couldn't help herself.

'It's me,' I said, not very helpfully, but she got the message. 'Just put your hand on my shoulder. I'll keep us both afloat.'

She did as she was told and the two of us bobbed gently in the pond scum. And now I had a problem. The moat wasn't that deep, but the water level was some ten feet below the walkway. Looking around, I couldn't see any steps of any kind. I had no idea how I was going to get her out. We were going to need a rope and a great deal of assistance and I couldn't hang on much longer. Her dress was so heavy she was pulling us both under. And, even though they'd shut down the water-commanding engine, a fine, damp, parasite-laden mist from the fountain was falling upon us the whole time. Because we weren't wet enough, were we?

I have to say that, at that moment, I couldn't feel that my drowning

was necessarily a bad thing, because going back and reporting to Max that not only had the two of them *not* had the pleasant afternoon she'd planned for them, but that I'd actually drowned Miss Lingoss, was not something I even wanted to contemplate. Better I died with her than have to face that. And let's not even start on explaining all this to Dr Bairstow.

Obviously, my brilliant idea had been to make Peterson look valiant and brave – and make him feel a bit better about himself as well – and he'd ruined that by not valiantly and bravely jumping in after her. I'd thought he could save her, swim to the bank on the tower side, heave her out, bend over her in concern, music would play, bluebirds would sing and everyone would live happily ever after and now none of that was looking very likely. I was very nearly panicking.

Unnecessarily, as it turned out. It would appear Peterson was quite capable of looking heroic without any help from me. Evans, standing on the bridge, shouted and gestured behind me, and here he came. He'd found a rowing boat from somewhere – of course he had. If anyone's going to find a boat in a crisis it would be Peterson – and he was forging his way through the pond scum, calm and competent, and managing to look stylish even when rowing. The bastard still had his hat on as well.

Looking over his shoulder, he called, 'I'm nearly with you. Don't even try to get her on board – the boat will capsize. I'll tow you both to safety.'

We clung to the side of the wooden boat as he towed us back to the bridge, right under the engine itself. Lingoss couldn't have had a better view if she'd planned it.

It took half a dozen men to pull us out, including Lord Herbert and his assistants. We were being rescued by the aristocracy! Yes, her clothing was heavy and sopping wet, but they'd have got her out a lot more quickly if she'd cooperated with her rescuers instead of being unable to take her eyes off the water-commanding engine above us.

Everyone clapped politely as we were heaved out of the alleged water. I wondered if they thought we were professional entertainers, hired to provide even more excitement this afternoon. If so, the least they could do was throw money because I could really have done with a drink. My mouth tasted like the bottom of a rabbit hutch.

They sat the dripping Lingoss on the bank and me alongside her. And yes, someone did pass me a flask. I've no idea what was in it but it did me the world of good, I can tell you. I'd happily have taken another swig but the bugger took it back again.

Someone brought my hat and boots. I was grieved to see the hat had survived. My cloak, however, was at the bottom of the moat so it wasn't all bad.

Peterson was bending over Lingoss, asking if she was all right. I

wiped my face and waited for him to remember her heroic rescuer as well. Good job I didn't hold my breath waiting for that one.

Sykes and North had somehow found their way to the bridge as well and were leaning over, anxiously looking down on us. I remembered the three of them, North, Sykes and Lingoss, had done their training together and, although North and Sykes couldn't stand each other, they both liked Lingoss. Everyone liked Lingoss. And yes, all right, she was a bonkers as ... well, as a very bonkers thing, but everyone liked her. She'd exploded a pig over Dr Bairstow's car once and lived. I don't think he'd even blasted her with a *Deductions from Wages to Pay for Damages* form.

Lord Herbert, having assured himself there were no bodies floating in the moat to block the water-intake valve had returned to his engine. I could hear him shouting instructions to start it up again, thus displaying a level of single-minded fanaticism that qualified him for St Mary's. Everyone else was very kind, though. We were offered dry clothing and blankets by some sort of steward, but Peterson politely declined. We couldn't go back wearing contemporary clothing and Mrs Enderby would kill us where we stood if we left our own gear behind. And it was a warm day. And it certainly wasn't the first time we'd been soaked to the skin. I don't know about anyone else but I was just grateful there hadn't been any swans in the moat.

People drifted away and left us. The water-commanding engine was far more exciting than we were. It was cold in the shadow of the tower and Lingoss's teeth were chattering so we helped her to her feet and the servants showed us the way back up through the tower and across the bridge into the warm and very welcome sunshine.

The crowds were thinner in the Pitched Court and the noise of the engine considerably less. Peterson was taking care of Lingoss so, while he was busy, I took Evans to one side, out of earshot, and asked if he had seen what had happened.

To my relief, he shook his head. 'I'm sorry, sir, but I'm not sure I can tell you anything useful.'

'Let me guess,' I said, 'your attention was elsewhere.'

'Well, I'm sorry, sir, but it was.' He nodded over to North and Sykes. 'They were having a right set-to. I was trying to shut them up so I didn't see it. I'm sorry.'

'Not your fault,' I said, which was true.

I had a sudden memory of Max in Sick Bay, with her tired eyes and the weight of the world on her shoulders. Well, I couldn't do anything about Leon. Or Matthew. I'd do what I could for Peterson, although I suspected it wouldn't be very much, but this – this was something I could do for her.

I beckoned over a suspiciously silent Sykes and North. I spoke very

quietly, because shouting is never the way to go.

‘Explain to me, please, how Miss Lingoss came to fall into the water.’

Evans spoke up. ‘Sir ...’

‘Thank you, Mr Evans. Could you go and keep an eye on our gear, please?’

He muttered, ‘Yes, sir,’ threw them both a sympathetic look and pushed off to get our stuff together.

They said nothing.

I let the silence drag on for long enough to make them uncomfortable and then said, ‘You can’t tell me, can you? Because you weren’t paying attention. You weren’t even looking. You were concentrating on the far more important job of sniping at each other. You could see what was going on. You could have shouted a warning. If, that is, you had actually been doing your job. You weren’t. And a colleague was injured because of that.’

They said nothing.

I leaned towards them and lowered my voice even further. ‘Right, you two, listen up, because I’m not saying this again. I know Max puts up with your shit because she values the different perspectives the pair of you bring to each assignment but, after today, that excuse is no longer tenable. Today, you crossed the line between constructive debate and personal animosity. The only reason I’m not packing us all back to St Mary’s now, right at this moment, is that Max doesn’t need the grief of a failed assignment, but let me tell you this. If either of you – for any reason – puts one more foot wrong this afternoon, I will use my authority to curtail the mission and take us all home, where you can explain your conduct to Dr Bairstow. Have I made myself clear?’

I’d never seen either of them so subdued. North stared straight ahead and Sykes stared at the ground.

‘Well?’

Not looking at each other, they nodded.

‘Right, I’m escorting Dr Peterson and Miss Lingoss back to the pod. I’m leaving you to get on with things here. Make whatever concessions are necessary to enable you both to work together this afternoon and then report back to the pod when you’ve finished. Because neither of you can be trusted, Mr Evans is in charge, and you will obey his every word. Please indicate your understanding of these instructions.’

They nodded.

Evans was bringing up our gear. I said, ‘Don’t take any crap from either of them. And you can leave the picnic with me as well.’

Well – two birds with one stone. With luck I’d frightened the living shit out of Sykes and North – I was pretty sure their work this afternoon would be impeccable – and got them and Evans safely out of the way

vis-à-vis Peterson and Lingoss. And snagged some food for myself. God, I'm good.

I helped Peterson to help Lingoss back to the pod. She was still coughing and retching but the cut over her eye had stopped bleeding.

'It's quite small,' said Peterson, peering at it. 'Nothing much to worry about, but you've been in dirty water and probably swallowed a fair bit as well. I'm sorry, Miss Lingoss, but I think you're due some time in Sick Bay.'

She wasn't in the slightest bit fazed, waving aside bouts of cholera or industrial-strength diarrhoea as an occupational hazard. 'Did you see it? Did you see the height he got on that fountain? It must have been a good forty feet. Higher than the tower itself.' She looked thoughtful. 'I wonder if we could duplicate that back at St Mary's. I must have a word with the professor as soon as possible.'

'She's fine,' I said to Peterson.

Back at the pod, Peterson peered helplessly at Lingoss who was a tangled mass of sodden silk. 'Are you able to get out of that dress by yourself?'

'Oh yes,' she said cheerfully. 'I think so. If either of you has a knife, I'll just cut the laces. I'll shout if I need any help but I think I'll be fine.'

She squelched off into the tiny bathroom leaving long wet marks across the floor. The techies weren't going to be happy either.

Peterson was rummaging in the lockers. People leave all sorts of things in them and there's usually some spare clothing knocking around somewhere. He pulled out a sweatshirt and some shorts.

'She'll have to stay inside the pod if she's going to wear those,' I said, fully embracing my role as the only sensible person present.

'I'll need to keep an eye on her with that head wound anyway.' He rummaged further. 'I can't find anything for you. Sorry.'

'Not a problem. I'll sit outside in the sun,' I said heroically, actually quite pleased because everything seemed to be working out for the best. They could stay inside and have a bit of a chat, and I could legitimately leave them to it. And I had the food, as well.

I could hear Peterson crashing around with the kettle and a minute later a mug of the steaming hot stuff turned up. For which I was grateful.

'You all right?' he asked. Better late than never, I suppose.

'Absolutely fine. Just a bit soggy. Although I did inadvertently ingest rather a lot of moat.'

'Yeah – you're going to be in Sick Bay too, for a while, anyway. Still, not a hardship for you, eh?'

I indicated my lack of comprehension.

'Eh?' he said, giving me a nudge.

I indicated deeper incomprehension.

‘Eh? Eh? You know – you and Nurse Hunter?’

I find it best to meet this sort of thing head on. ‘What about me and Hunter?’

‘Well, you know, what with her being ... you know.’

Has anyone else noticed that no one in the entire History Department can string more than two words together? It’s got to be all that tertiary education. It robs them of all basic communication skills. Bloody useless the lot of them.

I shook my head. ‘No – sorry, not with you.’

He would probably have pursued it further – he’s a bit of a terrier sometimes – but I was saved by Lingoss emerging from the bathroom wearing the sweatshirt and shorts and carrying the sodden dress and even more sodden undergarments. He handed her a mug of tea and told her to stay inside. We spread the dress and the jacket and the petticoats over a couple of bushes although there was so much fabric I reckoned it would all take about a year to dry.

I took off my stupid hat, carefully settled myself out of sight of anyone inside the pod but still within earshot and stretched out on the long grass. The sun was warm on my face. The afternoon was peaceful and quiet. I could smell grass and earth and just the faintest whiff of manure. Evans could cope with the Deadly Duo and surely I could safely leave Peterson and Lingoss to get on with things themselves for a few minutes. I closed my eyes.

They’d left the door open and I could hear a bit of shunting around as they made themselves comfortable inside the pod and then she said, ‘Is Mr Markham all right out there?’

‘Oh yes,’ said Peterson, rather more dismissively than I was happy with. ‘He’s only semi-domesticated and prefers to be outside. How about you? Any bumps or bruises? Do you feel sick? Any pain anywhere? Can you move all your arms and legs?’

‘I’m fine – although I drank so much moat I have a really nasty taste in my mouth.’

‘Here.’

There followed a long silence which I chose to believe was her drinking her tea.

Eventually, she said, ‘Should we check on Mr Markham?’

‘No.’

Any thoughts of sharing the food with him went straight out of the window. I sat up and had a quick rummage and the first thing I found was one of Mrs Mack’s pork pies. The one designed for two people. Not today ...

There were also chicken drumsticks, some bread and cheese, apples, jam tarts, pigs in blankets, and a huge fruit cake. Bearing in mind I was eating for two, I got stuck in.

He was asking her how she was feeling.

‘Absolutely fine, thank you, sir. How about you?’

That threw him a bit. ‘Me ...? Um ... fine, thank you.’

She said shyly, ‘Thank you for rescuing me.’

I waited for him to say, ‘Well, actually, it was Mr Markham who saved the day.’

‘Not at all, Miss Lingoss. An honour and a privilege.’

What? *What?* I took an enormous bite of pork pie to compensate for her lack of gratitude and when I was eventually able to hear over the sound of my own chewing I discovered they’d moved away from how wonderful Peterson was – trust me, it’s not a wide-ranging topic and soon covered – and were discussing her hair. I rolled my eyes. Obviously, we all have our own individual chat-up lines but ... seriously?

‘It’s a bit high-maintenance, though, isn’t it?’ he was saying. ‘You know – blue one day, purple the next. I mean – why do you do it?’

Actually, a very good question that nearly all of St Mary’s had probably wanted to ask at one time or another. I leaned forwards and tried to chew quietly.

She didn’t reply for a long time and the daft sod bottled out.

‘Sorry. That was a bit rude. Forget I asked.’

‘No, no, it’s OK. Actually, I’ve always done it.’

‘What – even at school?’

There was some more silence. I slapped a large slice of Wensleydale cheese on top of my fruit cake and took a massive bite.

‘It’s a long story.’

I grabbed a couple of sausages. This was going well. Thanks to him she was warm and dry. He’d made her tea and now they were talking to each other. Well, she was doing the talking, which was a good thing because that meant he couldn’t say anything daft or make a complete arse of himself. Although give him time.

He said quietly, ‘I would very much like to hear it.’

So would I. I leaned back against the side of the pod, made myself comfortable and alternated between sausage and fruit cake.

‘Well,’ she said. ‘I didn’t have a lot of difficulty at school but I wasn’t really ... mainstream ... if you know what I mean. And my parents weren’t awful – not in any way – but they were conventional. They were nice people and they had a nice house and they lived nice lives and I suppose they wanted a nice daughter who wore nice dresses and did nice things. Unfortunately, they got me. I was always dirty, perpetually taking things apart – my mother’s juicer never worked again. I wasn’t any trouble. I didn’t get pregnant or do drugs. I certainly wasn’t bad enough to warrant any special attention or outside help, so they dealt with the problem by ignoring it. I just ... went my own way. Which was

great. Up to a point.'

She stopped.

'Here,' he said, 'have some more tea,' and I could hear her mug being topped up.

'They were busy people. Dad was pushing back the frontiers of capitalism as fast as he could and Mum was always off fundraising for children in the Third World, so I pretty much took care of myself. Not terribly well, as it turned out, because one day there was a new teacher – a supply teacher standing in for our usual form teacher who'd gone off with some teaching-related illness – insanity, depression, alcoholism, substance abuse; you know, the sort of problems everyone gets after long-term exposure to kids – so anyway this supply teacher called me in one day and told me to tidy myself up a bit. Well, you've seen my hair – it's a bugger at the best of times ...'

'It wasn't blue then, was it?'

'Oh no. It was quite normal. Just a bit ... wayward.'

I could practically hear him grinning. 'Just out of interest – what colour is normal?'

'Not sure I can remember.'

'Well ... and this is just a helpful suggestion ... isn't it a case of just ... comparing the curtains to the carpet?'

I stuffed in another sausage and nodded. My own thoughts exactly.

'Not really – I have easy-care flooring.'

I nearly dropped my cake.

'Ah,' he said, carefully.

'So, anyway, I said everything was absolutely fine and she said what about the holes in my shoes and that my clothes were too small for me and when did I last wash and did she have to write to my parents? I said it wouldn't do any good because they were barely aware of my existence and she said not to be so silly, of course they were, they were my parents and they loved me because all parents loved their children, and she was so dismissive that it made me angry. I had two parents, both of whom were white and middle-class, so obviously I was the one at fault, and that was when I had my big idea.'

'Which was?'

'I dyed my hair royal blue.'

There was a bit of a silence and I must admit I was slightly mystified too.

'Because ...?'

'To prove to her she was wrong. About my parents not noticing me, I mean.'

'How?'

'Well, she said she was going to write to my parents about me, so that night I went blue. My parents had both left the house before me

next morning, as they usually did, so I got up and meandered off to school as usual, and when I got there they took one look at my hair and hit the roof. I tell you, sir, my feet barely touched the ground. I was out – via a swift visit to the Head’s office, of course. Suspended for three days and a letter to my parents.

‘I went home and was careful to stay out of sight. Not that that was a problem. And before you say anything, my parents could hear me moving around in my room and see the light under the door, so they knew I was all right. And I usually fed myself anyway. I nipped downstairs the next day, intercepted the school’s letter, obviously, and just lazed around for three days. Then on the fourth day I went back to school.’

I’d stopped eating in admiration. A clever girl, our Lingoss.

‘Still blue?’

‘Still blue. Again, they took one look and the next minute we’re all in the Head’s office and waiting for my parents to turn up.’

And I thought *my* schooldays were exciting!

‘So what happened?’ asked Peterson.

‘Well, my mother screamed, “Oh my God, what have you done to your hair?” Which pretty much made the point I’d been trying to make. I’d had my blue hair for four days and my parents hadn’t noticed. I’d been suspended for three days and they hadn’t noticed that either. It was a quite odd, actually. I looked across at the supply teacher, expecting a bit of a bollocking, but she just winked at me. Then she got up and left. Just like that. I never saw her again. But things got better. New clothes. New shoes. And I think my parents set up some sort of timetable on the fridge. You know – six to six-thirty p.m. – talk to daughter. That sort of thing.’

‘But you had to get rid of the blue hair, surely.’

‘Oh yes. I offered to shave my head but they said that wasn’t necessary. Rather quickly, I thought. So they gave me special permission to wear a beanie until I could get it back to its normal colour. In fact, I’ve still got it. The beanie, I mean. I keep it for sentimental reasons.’

‘Why?’

‘Because it changed my life, sir. Having blue hair meant that people had noticed me. They’d listened to me. That was when I discovered I didn’t have to conform to other people’s ideas of how girls should be. I didn’t have to fit in. I could be exactly what *I* wanted to be. Do what I wanted to do. After that, it was just a case of identifying my goals and going for them. She’ll never know it, but that schoolteacher changed my life.’

‘And here you are today.’

‘Indeed, sir. Here I am today.’

‘You don’t have to call me “sir”, you know. Not when we’re talking

like this.'

'Well, you don't have to keep calling me "Miss Lingoss", either.'

The silence dragged on. I imagined the two of them staring at their feet with embarrassment and then she said, 'How are you really feeling ... Tim?'

I'd forgotten how direct she is. There was a long silence. In fact, I stopped eating in case I missed something.

He tried to pass it off as a joke. 'Hey, I'm not the one who fell in the moat.'

She said nothing. The silence dragged on.

'But I'm absolutely fine.'

She still said nothing.

'No, I am. Really.'

I don't know if he was trying to convince her or himself. He was certainly making a bloody awful job of convincing me.

Eventually he said, 'I mean ... you know what they say ... life goes on.'

Still silence from Lingoss.

'Because it does, doesn't it? Life goes on. And on. And on. Whether you want it to or not. In fact, the less you want it to, the more it does. Because life's like that – a complete bastard, don't you think?'

She was silent but he was talking to himself now anyway. 'You drag yourself through every long, long day, and every night you close your eyes and yes, for three or four hours the pain goes away, and then you open your eyes and wouldn't you know it, there's another bloody day stretching out in front of you, and another one after that and another one after that, and you just want them to stop, but you can't because everyone's trying so hard to be ... to help ...'

'And that's yet another burden,' she said quietly.

He must have nodded. 'But I carry on because that's what we do. And I work and talk and laugh and join in and everyone thinks I'm over it and I'm not and I never will be.'

I prayed – and yes, I do that occasionally – that she would realise he wasn't talking about Dottle.

'Of course you're not,' she said. 'Of course you never will be. Why would you be? But you might find – as time goes by – that the pain is easier to bear.'

'Yes. Max said something like that to me once. And it did help. But then Leon came back.'

'And Helen never will.'

'No. She'll never come back. I'll never see her again. She's gone forever.'

In the silence that followed, I heard him make a tiny sound.

I got up as quietly as I could and went to stand at the top of the path

in case Evans and the others came blundering back but there was no sign of them.

I opened my com. 'Mr Evans, how much longer?'

I heard him consulting the others. 'About half an hour, sir.'

'Very well. Report in as you approach. I don't want to mistake any of you for contemporaries.'

'Copy that.'

I watered a bush, tried to adjust my wet clothes and generally hung about for ten minutes or so and then approached the pod with some caution, just in time to catch Lingoss saying, 'You don't have to do it with me,' and wondered what the hell they could possibly have been discussing.

'Do what?' he said, sounding startled and he wasn't the only one.

'Pretend. You don't have to. You don't have to be brave or cheerful or anything like that. If you want to drop by and shout or scream or ... anything else ... on the days when it's too much and people aren't helping ... then come by my room. It doesn't matter if you just want to sit and not go to the trouble of making conversation. That's fine. I don't mind.'

He said very quietly, 'Thank you.'

'No, I mean it. It's a genuine offer. If you ever need a respite, I'm the second door on the left. West Landing.'

'All right,' he said, slowly. And then with more confidence, 'Yes. All right. I think I'd like to. If you're sure.'

'I am,' she said.

'All right. Um ... more tea?'

Good choice. Even Peterson can't go wrong with 'more tea?'

'Oh yes, thank you.'

And now the silence had a different quality about it. I relaxed back against the pod and snagged a couple of jam tarts. And then another sausage.

'I hope ...' he said. And stopped.

I leaned forwards in anticipation.

'I hope ...'

'Yes ... Tim?'

'If I might be permitted a personal remark, I hope, no matter how many of your goals you achieve, you won't ever abandon the blue hair completely.'

'Oh, no – I still have at least one more goal to go.'

'I'm ... um ... quite pleased to hear that because I do look forward to seeing you each day. And the different things you do with your hair, of course.'

'Oh. Um. I look forward to seeing you too, sir. Tim.'

'And I don't have to dye my hair blue,' he said, brightly.

I didn't bang my head against the pod but it was close. I didn't bang his head against the pod either and that was even closer.

There was more of a silence which I was hoping might have a bit of a hand-holding quality to it, although this was the History Department so your guess is as good as mine. I do wonder about historians sometimes. They sit in front of you, all bright-eyed and alert and wagging their tails and you'd swear they understood every word you say. But they don't. They really don't.

I was roused by Evans telling me they were on their way back. I got up and went to meet them, making a bit of noise about it. Tactful, eh?

Sykes and North disappeared into the pod. Evans sat down, grinned at me, and began to rummage through the wreckage of our former picnic.

I asked him how it had gone. He was too full of fruit cake to answer but nodded vigorously and gave me the thumbs up. That's the difference between the Security Section and the History Department, who would have talked at you for forty-five minutes and you'd have been no wiser at the end of it. With the added bonus of bleeding ears.

Peterson emerged. 'You're very quiet. We thought you were dead. Shall we be getting back?'

'Have they got everything they needed?'

'Apparently, yes, they've got some good footage. Max will be pleased.'

'A very successful day then,' I said, getting damply to my feet. 'Everyone achieved their objective.'

'Er ... yes,' he said, looking slightly puzzled and I didn't see any point in enlightening him.

Lingoss was looking pale with the beginnings of a cracking black eye and Peterson didn't want to hang around. He, Sykes and North did the FOD plod outside and collected Lingoss's damp clothes while Evans and I did the POD plod inside. Everything seemed to be in order but I sent Evans into the bathroom, just to make sure. As the door closed behind him, Lingoss turned to me. 'Thank you.'

'Oh, well, it was Peterson who pulled you out.'

'I was thanking the person who pushed me in.'

It's not often I'm stuck for words. 'Um ...'

Sadly, that didn't seem to work. She continued staring at me in the way that women do. Well, they do to me, anyway. I had no choice but to brazen it out. I grinned at her. 'Yeah. Sorry.'

'Apology accepted. So – did I pass? Am I acceptable?'

I decided next time, Max could do this herself. 'Um ... well, as far as I'm concerned, yes. Of course, I'm not the one you'll have to convince.'

We both knew I wasn't talking about Peterson.

'Will you put in a good word for me?'

‘I think that’s the first time anyone’s ever asked me to do that, but if you think it will help ...’

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘Just one thing,’ I said quietly, ‘and it’s important.’

‘Yes, sir?’

‘Don’t die.’

She grinned. ‘I’ll do my best.’

‘Tell Dr Peterson we’ve finished in here, will you?’

She scampered off Petersonwards.

There was the usual delay while they tidied themselves up a bit because historians never go back looking scruffy. No one said anything about tidying up the Security Section, half of whom were still a bit on the soggy side and definitely letting the side down.

‘All set?’ said Peterson, and the world went white.

They carted Lingoss off immediately we stepped out of the pod and, despite my protests, I was carted off too. In vain did I protest that over the years I’d glugged enough stagnant water to render me immune to just about everything, I was shoved into the scanner as soon as they’d finished with Lingoss.

For the avoidance of unnecessary stress and anxiety to the reader, neither of us developed anything horrible, although I had slight indigestion from eating so much rich fruit cake and cheese too quickly. A burden I bore very nearly uncomplainingly.

Thirty-six hours later I was pronounced fit and ready to go.

They’d discharged Max the day before, so I had to go and find her because, trust me, it’s always better to go looking for her than have her come looking for you.

She was back in her own room, looking tons better, sprawled on the sofa surrounded by books and the western world’s entire supply of chocolate.

‘Hey, Max. Looking better.’

‘Thank you,’ she said, peeling back another wrapper. ‘It’s good to be out of Sick Bay.’

‘Lucky you,’ I said. ‘Poor old Lingoss has at least another twenty-four hours to go. And I’ve had so many injections I feel like a pin cushion.’

‘It’s your own fault,’ she said unsympathetically. ‘When will you learn to keep your mouth closed when you jump into stagnant water?’

‘If the bloody History Department got a grip then I wouldn’t have to, would I?’

‘Yes, that’s a point – I’ve read your report and you didn’t say how it happened.’

‘I didn’t see it,’ I lied. ‘I do know there was a huge commotion and

panic when the engine started up. I was pushed about all over the place. Quite honestly, Max, I'm surprised more people didn't end up in the moat.'

She nodded, apparently accepting this at face value. 'So – what do you think?'

I didn't make the mistake of thinking she was talking about the assignment.

'He likes her. No doubt about it.'

She clucked impatiently. 'He likes everyone. Even you.'

'Everyone likes me,' I said indignantly. 'I'm adorable, but what I'm saying is that, thanks to me, there was an opportunity for them to sit down together and have a bit of a private chat. About proper things, too, not just boring history. Long way to go, though. For both of them.'

'What about her?'

'Oh, she'd die for him.'

She grimaced. 'Unfortunate choice of words given his record to date.'

'Yeah, sorry, but seriously, Max, I don't think either of them could do better. They're both inarticulate. They're both prey to strange obsessions. And she's weird enough even for Peterson.'

We sat in silence for a moment and then she said, 'Well, thanks. I appreciate your efforts. Let's hope they bear fruit.'

I was about to say something wise and oracular when Leon came in. They smiled at each other and I suddenly realised I was very much detropp. As the French would say.

'Are you infecting my wife?' enquired Leon.

'Other way round,' I said gloomily, getting to my feet.

He enquired where I was going and I explained about being detropp.

'I think he means *de trop*,' said Max.

'I'm certain that he does,' said Leon, 'but I think he forgets we heard him speaking flawless French last Christmas.'

Shit – I don't usually make that sort of mistake. Too much on my mind.

To distract them, I asked if she'd seen anything of Peterson.

'He was up here this morning.'

'Did he have anything in particular to say?' I said, casually.

'Not really. Apparently, you look very nice in pink and managed to plough your way through a picnic designed for six people.'

'That's me. Well, I should be off.'

'And you saved Lingoss, of course.'

'Well, I jumped in after her and then Peterson had to save us both, so I was just the middleman really.'

'And I don't know what you said to Sykes and North but it would seem that if they confine themselves solely to professional matters they are able to speak politely to each other.'

‘Just part of my normal service,’ I said, heading for the door before things became too embarrassing.

Leon saw me out. He paused on the landing outside and I braced myself. Now what?

‘Thank you,’ he said, quietly.

‘You’re very welcome,’ I replied, basking in this unexpected approval, ‘but for what?’

‘For going a long way towards putting Max’s mind at rest.’

I hesitated. ‘He never mentioned Dottle. Not once.’

‘I wouldn’t worry too much about that – that’s guilt, not grief. Much more easily dealt with.’

I nodded.

He lowered his voice. ‘I have to know, what on earth makes the two of you think that a blue-haired madwoman who only has to look at something for it to violently combust is going to improve his life?’

‘No choice,’ I said, looking him in the eye. ‘The red-haired one is already spoken for.’

He laughed – which doesn’t happen often. ‘By the way, Hunter’s looking for you.’

I brightened. Hunter looking for me during normal working hours never bodes well. Hunter looking for me *outside* of normal working hours ... well ...

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘She says you’ve had a letter ...’

THE END

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Thanks to my editor, Rebecca Lloyd, who grapples almost daily with my bizarre punctuation. I freely admit that I wasn't listening when my class covered commas and the use of, because I couldn't see that it would ever be important. I was wrong. All mistakes are mine.

Thanks to everyone at Accent Press who grapple with me almost daily. They tell me all mistakes are mine.

Thanks to my brother who heroically went with me to Raglan Castle on the coldest day of the century. We both nearly died. We scrambled over everything, carefully not falling into the moat – which these days is considerably cleaner than I have depicted – arguing loudly about steam-pumps and their likely set-up and location and frightening those around us. On arriving home, I Googled – which I should have done before we set out – and found we'd got everything completely and absolutely wrong. All mistakes are his fault.

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